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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the use of humor in the classroom. A longitudinal content analysis of presentational and classroom studies from 1941 to 1991 was conducted. Earlier studies were included if they had been cited five or more times within articles on humor in the classroom. Scholars have argued that humor: is a powerful tool in the creation of a classroom communication climate; reduces fears/anxieties of students; increases student interaction and participation; and makes the learning environment more enjoyable. Misuses of humor in the classroom may be more devastating than the advantages gained by creating an open environment. Damaging humor can occur even after an open climate has been created through the use of humor. Guidelines for the use of humor in the classroom include: (1) consider the teacher's presentational skills when planning the use of humor; (2) consider the audience; (3) consider the course material when planning to use humor; and (4) practice the humor on colleagues or family members. These are the primary concerns that the ethical teacher should consider when using humor in the classroom. (Contains 38 references.) (RS)

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Humor as an instructional practice: A longitudinal content analysis of humor use in the classroom.

by

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A funny thing happened on the way to researching this paper. I found that the use of humor in the classroom is a complex and controversial topic. The controversy began when Lull (1940) contended that humor had little or no effect on the persuasiveness of a speech. Taylor (1964) extended Lull's argument when he found only non-significant differences in the retention levels of students who heard a humorous versus non-humorous informative speech. However, recent findings indicate differently.

Those who advocate the use of humor in the classroom point to Ziv's (1989) findings that humor is a strategy employed by educational "superstars." They also revel in studies that show humor as positively related to teacher competency evaluations (Bryant, Comisky, Crane & Zillman, 1980) and that 93% of students, at all educational levels, view humor as an essential ingredient in teaching (Check, 1986).

The use of humor in the classroom has been found to influence students perception of a teacher (Downs & Civikly, 1986), increase the student's ability to retain information (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Ziv, 1982) and is used by teachers who rank high in immediacy

(Gorham & Christophel, 1990). Studies regarding the frequency and type of humor used in the classroom indicate that teachers use humor often (Bryant, Comisky, & Zillman, 1979; Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988), teachers use different types of humor (Bryant et al., 1979; Downs et al., 1988; Gorham & Christophel, 1990), experienced teachers tend to use more humor than less experienced teachers (Javidi & Long, 1989), and award-winning teachers use less humor, but more variety in their lectures than do non-award-winning teachers (Downs et al., 1988).

Humor has also been positively tied to a number of classroom issues. It has been proposed as a successful teaching tool when the topic of the class is of a sensitive nature (Johnson, 1990). Ziv has positively linked humor to creativity (1976), divergent thinking (1983), and aggression catharsis (1987) within the classroom setting. However, not all research of classroom humor has been positive.

Opponents of classroom humor point out that if instructors acquire the reputation of frustrated comics, they are rated by students as less competent in their fields (Gruner, quoted in Zemke 1991). Other

disadvantages of using humor in the classroom revealed that non-germane humor may hinder the instructors cause (Youngman, 1966), sarcasm and ridiculing humor are described as negative teacher traits by students (Check, 1986), and self-disparaging (Gruner, 1984), sick (Munn & Gruner, 1981), excessive (Gruner, 1985) or tendentious/non-tendentious humor (Darling & Civikly, 1987) will produce negative responses.

Perhaps an even stronger argument was made by humor proponent Debra Korobkin (1988) when she admitted that the "actual empirical research investigating the relationship between humor and adult learning is negligible" (p. 155). It would seem that the use of humor in the classroom should be a calculated decision made by the teacher after considering a number of classroom variables.

The purpose of this study is to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the use of humor in the classroom. The method of analysis is a longitudinal content analysis of presentational and classroom studies from 1940 to 1991. The research studies were selected for analysis if they were either a) from 1990-1991 or b) earlier studies cited five or more times

within articles on humor in the classroom. I will first examine the strengths of classroom humor. Then the weaknesses will be discussed. Finally, I will provide guidelines for communication teachers to consider when using humor in the classroom. I contend that humor, planned and practiced, and applied to certain topic areas, may be used effectively in many situations.

Advantages to using humor in the classroom

Many scholars have argued that the use of humor aids in creating an open communication climate in the classroom (Neuliep, 1991; Korobkin, 1988; Perret, 1984; Long, 1983; Ziv, 1983; Mogavero, 1979; Ziv, 1976; Dixon, 1973; Gilland and Mauritsen, 1971; and Coser, 1960). Humor is a powerful tool in the creation of a classroom communication climate. It may be used to enhance a speaker's (teachers') image or credibility (Korobkin, 1988; Gruner, 1985; Perret, 1984; Chang & Gruner, 1981), to reduce fears/anxieties of students (Korobkin, 1988; Long, 1983; Ziv, 1976; Dixon, 1973; Gilland & Mauritsen, 1971), to increase student interaction and participation (Korobkin, 1988; Ziv,

1983; Ziv, 1976; Gilland and Mauritsen, 1971), to increase creative thinking (Korobkin, 1988; Ziv, 1983; Ziv, 1976), and to make the learning environment more enjoyable (Neuliep, 1991; Korobkin, 1988; Perret, 1984; Long, 1983; Ziv, 1983; Ziv, 1976). Furthermore, students desire the use of humor by an instructor (Korobkin, 1988; Check, 1986; Gruner, 1985; Check 1979). It would appear that humor is an important aspect of building a positive educational climate. But historically, the use of humor in the classroom has been considered improper.

The use of humor as a climate creating tool is a recent phenomenon. Korobkin (1988) claims that prior to the twentieth century, teachers considered the classroom to be a place of serious business, and the use of humor was a frivolous activity that pulled students away from what was important. She claims college teachers made a conscious decision to be humorless because "serious professionals" conduct serious business (p. 154). Unfortunately the "seriousness" of their conduct ignored a number of unique and important benefits that humor offers the educational experience.

Korobkin (1988) found several benefits of humor to learners. She concluded that humor increases retention of material, student-teacher rapport, attentiveness and interest, motivation towards and satisfaction with learning, playfulness and positive attitude, individual and group task productivity, class discussion and animation, and creativity, idea generation and divergent thinking. She also found that it decreased academic stress, anxiety toward subject matter, dogmatism and class monotony (p. 155). These benefits of humor are closely linked to the classroom climate.

The use of humor can help create an open classroom environment. Long (1983) claimed that learning can become more enjoyable and less stressful in a laughter-filled class. It is the instructor's use of humor that allows for the creation of an open environment. Ziv (1983) claims that once the teacher has given approval and extended the invitation to laugh, the resulting "contagious" effect has a "positive reinforcing effect on each member of the group, augmenting the enjoyment of all" (p. 74). He goes on to argue that:

> The presence of laughter tends to open learners to divergent thinking previously suppressed by the

> critical, traditional self. New, often unlikely and outrageous ideas surface in this kind of environment as the "fun mood" increases creativity (p. 73-74).

It would appear that teachers would jump at the chance to use a strategy that offers so many advantages. Yet many teachers shy away from using humor in the classroom because while it offers many advantages, it may also be a double edged sword.

Disadvantages to using humor in the classroom

There are concerns that must be addressed when one attempts to use humor in the classroom. It is important to consider these concerns because to misuse humor in the classroom once may be more devastating than the advantages gained by creating an open environment. It is also important to mention that damaging humor can occur even after an open climate has been created through the use of humor.

Types of humor that are considered to be dangerous in the classroom setting include: sick or distasteful humor about an individual or group of individuals (Munn and Gruner, 1981); ridicule of a person or their

cultural heritage (Korobkin, 1988); satirical humor which is aimed at discrediting an opinion that may be held by member of the class (Korobkin 1988); cynicism or any other forms of sharp "put down" that can be seen as being punishing and non-productive; and sexual humor, which would include female or male sexist jokes, jokes about an individual's anatomy, or jokes concerning an individual's sexual preference (Bryant et al., 1979, Bryant et al., 1980). Pearson, Miller and Senter (1983) claim that distaste for sexual humor springs from both moral and social origins and should be avoided because it often discriminates against particular social groups; e.g., it is frequently sexist, ageist, or racist (p. 257).

These forms of humor can create very dangerous precedents for students. A student may view this type of humor used at their expense by an expert as an indication that they are somehow unworthy of the respect of that teacher. In a sexual or racist context, a student may feel that they are being discriminated against by being forced to here a derogatory statement about their heritage or gender. This type of a situation may create a hostile

environment, because it may be assumed that the teacher has a prejudice against that particular group of people. Another very important concern with prejudicial humor is that legal action may be taken against the teacher or the school that discriminates against an individual's gender, sexual preference, race, or physical condition. In fact, one of the few ways in which a teacher may have tenure revoked is a substantiated claim of sexual harassment which may be implied through the use of humor. Regardless of legal action, this type of humor is very dangerous in any classroom. According to Korobkin (1988), "Ethnic, racial, religious and other forms of humor must be carefully scrutinized before they are used in an educational context" (p. 156). I feel that any humor that is sexual or prejudicial in nature should not be used in the classroom regardless of the environment that has been created.

One of the biggest dangers in using questionable humor in the classroom is that it may occur spontaneously, or the instructor may simply not realize that the humor could offend a class member. It is for this reason that I advocate the calculated and

practiced use of humor in the classroom. When a teacher weighs the benefits of using humor against the problems that misuse creates, they are placed in a precarious position. I feel that the advantages are important enough to "play with the fire," but I also feel that until the teacher has practiced enough to handle the matches of humor, they should first test it out. I would expect a person interested in becoming a comedian practices their material on a group of friends or family members to reduce the possible embarrassment of being "not" laughed off the stage. While this situation may be dangerous to the person on stage, it is not nearly as damaging as a student whose self concept is lowered because an instructor did not care to run their joke by a colleague or family member. Nor is that embarrassment as damaging as the loss of a promotion or even an instructor's career due to the use of damaging humor in the classroom.

Guidelines to using humor in the classroom

Zemke (1991) argues, "what could be less humorous than a carefully calculated joke?" (p. 26). Perhaps a better question is "how can I effectively use humor in

my teaching endeavors without reducing my credibility, being considered a frustrated comic, or offending members of my class?" I offer the following guidelines in answer to this important question:

1. Consider your presentational skills when planning the use of humor in the classroom.
   --there are many different types of humor and many different ways to deliver humor.
   --if you are not an extroverted person, do not use extroverted humor (Gruner, 1970).
2. Consider your audience.
   --do you have a fair homogeneous group that would appreciate your humor, or do you have a heterogeneous group where only part of the group may appreciate your humor?
   --will your humor be offensive to anyone in the class?
   --do not disparage members of your class if they will feel singled out unfairly.

3. Consider your course material when planning to use humor.

--superior teachers use more jokes that apply to course material (Downs et al., 1988) and jokes not germane to the topic may reduce credibility (Youngman, 1966).

--humor tied to course material may increase student retention of course material (Kaplan, & Pascoe, 1977, Ziv, 1982).

--self-disparaging humor by those perceived as higher status (college professors) are rated as more witty, funny and having a strong sense of humor without reducing there credibility (Chang, & Gruner, 1981).

--if used sparingly and in good taste, disparaging wit may be used successfully by teachers whether that wit disparages self or others (Gruner, 1984).

--humor may be appropriate to teaching sensitive topics (Johnson, 1990), but of course if used inappropriately it does more damage than good.

4. Practice your humor on colleagues or family members.

--it is better to have it flop on a friend.

--some humor that does not appear offensive to you may be offensive to members of the class.

--the use of "sick" jokes has resulted in negative evaluations and is considered "childish" humor by college students (Munn, & Gruner, 1981).

--it is better to find that your humor may offend someone before you use it.

These guidelines are by no means exhaustive, but they are primary concerns that the ethical teacher should consider when using humor in the classroom. The well prepared instructor, who plans humor into the course and addresses the concerns of misused humor, has

the opportunity to create an effective and enjoyable learning environment. Korobkin (1988) states:

> Integration of humorous activities and comments into the instructional sequence can be a slow and cautious process that requires a lot of trial and revision, much like a comedy routine. Instructors need to examine the subject matter, their own personal brand of humor, their presentational skills, and their audiences needs in order to develop planned humor use and occasional spontaneity (p. 156).

The advantages to using humor in the classroom are significant. The possibility to use humor in a way that damages the self concept or discriminates against a student is significant. However these two effects can be mutually exclusive. The reasons to use humor are important enough to outweigh the disadvantages. The guidelines to using humor are practical and relatively user friendly. Yet the fact remains: the proper use of humor in a classroom takes time, energy and practice. In the final analysis, the impact on students is worth the time, effort and even practicing of anecdotes, stories or jokes prior to use in the

classroom. When considering our decision of whether or not to expend the energy to properly use humor, we should remember the words of a wise professor: "It is more fun to teach well than poorly."

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